

Uzbekistan

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Freedom of the Press

Uzbekistan's legal framework ostensibly prohibits censorship and guarantees freedom of speech and the right to independent information. In practice, however, such protections are systematically ignored by President Islam Karimov's autocratic government, which continued to exert near-total control over the media in 2013, despite a public pledge made in June to support the country's journalists.

Convictions for libel and defamation can result in fines and jail time, and public insult of the president is punishable by up to five years in prison. Journalists can also face legal penalties for "interference in internal affairs" and "insulting the dignity of citizens," as well as charges unrelated to their work. Uzbekistan has an access to information law on the books, but it is not enforced. Journalists working for unaccredited foreign outlets or unregistered domestic outlets are not legally recognized as journalists and risk persecution by the government.

In April and May 2013, the UN Human Rights Council held a Universal Period Review on Uzbekistan and issued a number of specific recommendations with respect to the jailing of journalists and human rights defenders, an ongoing crackdown on civil society, the total absence of freedom of expression, and a ban on foreign media outlets operating in the country, among other problems. The Uzbek government rejected the findings of the review and all of its recommendations.

Virtually all local media outlets are linked directly or indirectly to the state, and the National Security Service actively manipulates press reports to present a carefully constructed image of the country, occasionally allowing limited criticism of local corruption. At least three separate agencies are responsible for enforcing the government's intricate censorship regime: the Centre for Monitoring Mass Communications, which monitors the internet and reports to a government committee with the authority to block websites that are deemed inappropriate; a department tasked with "information analysis" that reports to the cabinet; and another, similar service in the president's office. Widespread self-censorship is a serious problem, as investigative journalists fear reprisals in the form of harassment, loss of employment, or jail time. Though Karimov regularly invites criticism of the government from the media, local journalists explain that the invitation only refers to criticism of low-level, local institutions, which allows the president to create a façade of reform by periodically firing subordinates while leaving the true source of the problems untouched.

State-owned telecommunications carrier Uztelecom continued to control the country's internet connection in 2013, blocking access to the sites of foreign news organizations, human rights groups, and exile publications, among others. The popular news site Olam.uz was shut down for eight months beginning in January on politically motivated charges, and approximately 40 websites—including the Uzbek-language version of Wikipedia—were reportedly blocked during the year. Nevertheless, controversial content occasionally made its way past the censors. In June, an unknown singer from the group Asal Choi (Honey Tea) appeared in a provocative YouTube video, declaring his love to a male colleague. Homosexuality is illegal in Uzbekistan, and the video elicited a heated debate among commenters on the site.

The few remaining independent journalists in Uzbekistan—most of whom contribute to foreign media outlets because local independent outlets are virtually nonexistent—continue to face pressure from Karimov's regime, including harassment, intimidation, beatings, and detention without legal justification.

Foreign media have been gradually expelled since the 2005 Andijon massacre, in which government troops killed hundreds of demonstrators, straining Uzbekistan's relations with democratic countries. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) journalist Natalia Antelava, who broke a story on forced sterilization of women in Uzbekistan, was banned from the country in 2012. In an environment where little credible information is available, foreign or exiled journalists and analysts are often forced to rely on speculation or hearsay.

Throughout 2013, the government targeted journalists and activists who publicly exposed government abuses. In July, Nadezhda Atayeva, an exiled activist who reported on human rights abuses, including imprisoned journalists and forced child labor, was sentenced to seven years in prison after being tried in absentia on fabricated embezzlement charges. Independent journalist Sergey Naumov, who covers sensitive topics such as forced labor in the cotton industry, was abducted by authorities and held incommunicado for several days in September. His colleagues later learned that he was serving 12 days in administrative detention for "petty hooliganism" after a hearing in which he had no access to independent counsel. Rights groups believe that the charges were fabricated and that he was targeted because of his work. Award-winning Uzbek writer Mamadali Makhmudov was released from prison in April after serving a 14-year sentence on fabricated charges of being involved in an alleged assassination attempt on the president. He was 72 years old upon his release.

Uzbekistan remains among the world's most notorious jailers of journalists and free expression activists. According to Human Rights Watch reports, at least three dozen journalists, activists, writers, and intellectuals are being held in Uzbek jails and penal colonies as a result of their work. Two of the journalists have been held for more than 14 years. Muhammad Bekjanov and Yusuf Ruzimuradov of the opposition newspaper *Erk* have been imprisoned since March 1999; Salijon Abdurakhmanov of the independent news website Uznews, since June 2008; and freelance journalist Dilmurod Saiid, since February 2009. (*Erk* is banned in Uzbekistan, and while Uznews remains active, its editor now operates from Germany.) Bekjanov and Ruzimuradov have both been tortured in detention; their health severely deteriorated in 2013, and they have been denied adequate medical care. Bekjanov was due to be released in January 2012, but a court sentenced him to an additional five years based on questionable allegations that he had broken prison rules. Abdurakhmanov, who is 63 years old, was again denied amnesty at the end of 2013. In April, the International Committee of the Red Cross announced that it would halt visits to Uzbek prisons due to the government's continued obstruction of its work.

According to the government, there are 663 active newspapers in Uzbekistan, as well as 195 magazines, 13 periodical bulletins, 35 radio stations, and 53 television stations. Most broadcasting comes from four state-run television channels. Ownership of nonstate media outlets is opaque, though journalists report that there is not a great public demand to know who owns private outlets, as they all generally report the same version of the news. The government controls most publishing houses and printing presses. A number of regional and local television and radio stations are privately owned, and a few private printing presses produce independent publications that avoid politically sensitive topics and have limited circulation. Low pay within Uzbekistan's media industry encourages journalists to accept bribes.

The leading mobile phone operator, Uzdunrobita, filed for bankruptcy in April 2013 after a prolonged and unsuccessful bid to defend itself against tax evasion and antitrust charges. The case against Uzdunrobita—a subsidiary of the Russian telecommunications company MTS—highlights the hostile environment for foreign investors in the sector. Karimov's daughter, Gulnara Karimova, was being investigated by prosecutors in Sweden and Switzerland during the same period for allegedly demanding bribes totaling \$300 million from Sweden's TeliaSonera to enter the Uzbek mobile-phone market.

Approximately 38 percent of the population used the internet in 2013. The small minority of citizens who access foreign news outlets get around state blocking by using proxy servers. Social-networking sites

remain comparatively free, and use of social-media platforms for sharing sensitive information is growing. There are more than 150,000 Facebook users. Karimova, long believed to be a possible successor to her father, used the U.S.-based microblogging service Twitter in 2013 to expose a power struggle within the ruling family. She amassed 50,000 followers, including academics and foreign journalists, before her account was deactivated in November.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

95

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

30

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

37

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

28